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The limits of everyday nationhood

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Some brilliant early essays by John Stuart Mill, Lord Acton and Ernest Renan apart, the study of nationalism is barely a century old. But, starting with the Austro-Marxists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner in the 1900s, and the historical analyses of nationalist ideology by Carlton Hayes, Louis Snyder and Hans Kohn from the 1920s, there has been a burgeoning literature on every aspect of nations and nationalism. In the post-war period, social scientists like Karl Deutsch (1966) and Ernest Gellner (1964 and 1983) joined the historians in their quest to uncover the intertwined causes of nationalism's appeal and the proliferation of nation states in the wake of decolonization. The high point of this social science approach was reached in the late 1970s and the 1980s with the publications of Michael Hechter (1975), Tom Nairn (1977), John Armstrong (1982), John Breuilly (1993[1982]), Benedict Anderson (1981[1982]), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), Anthony Smith (1986) and John Hutchinson (1987). The works of each of these scholars contained a 'grand narrative' of nationalism: an overall account of why and how the world became divided into nations, and why nationalism became the dominant ideology of the modern

epoch. Of course, as one would expect in any field of study, there have been sharp divisions over key issues such as the definition of the nation, the antiquity of nations and nationalism, and the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism. Yet, there was also a surprising degree of agreement over the need for a broad theoretical and historical approach to the many issues in the field – a consensus reinforced in subsequent works by Eric Hobsbawm (1990), Liah Greenfeld (1992), Walker Connor (1994), Adrian Hastings (1997) and Steven Grosby (2002).

Yet, the same decade of the 1990s saw a clear rejection of the grand narratives and the causal-historical rationale behind these accounts. Influenced by the cultural turn of postmodernism, and drawing on a number of sources – the works of Benedict Anderson (1991[1983]) and Michael Billig (1995), discourse analysis, gender studies, cultural studies and political philosophy – the new wave of research in the field has turned its back on macro-analytic studies and focused instead on specific issues raised by the multicultural type of liberal society characteristic of the late 20th and early 21st century West.

In particular, there has been a rejection of elite-centred studies. Nationalism, it is argued, following Walker Connor, is after all a mass phenomenon. This is the burden of the article by Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss. Their basic claim is that ‘To make the nation is to make people national’. Unfortunately, they argue, macro-structural analyses have focused on nationalism ‘from above’, that is, from the perspective of the state and the elites; the ‘people’ in whose name nations are constructed ‘are curiously missing from much of the scholarship’. But, they continue, we cannot assume that the masses to whom nationalist projects are directed are always in tune with the nationalist messages of the elites. Rather, their responses need to be studied in relation to their own concerns and their own everyday experiences. This constitutes a new field of study, the field of an ‘everyday nationhood’.

The bulk of Fox and Miller-Idriss’s article is then given over to a systematic delineation of such a field under four headings: ‘Talking the Nation’, the discursive construction of the nation through everyday speech; ‘Choosing the Nation’, the decisions made by ordinary people about nationhood (and ethnicity); ‘Performing the Nation’, the ritual enactment of symbols invoking the nation; and ‘Consuming the Nation’, the expression of national differences in the daily tastes and preferences of ordinary people. As the authors point out, none of these aspects is new; there is already a very considerable literature on each of them. What is new here is their synthesis of these aspects and their literatures, and their attempt to establish on this basis a separate field of enquiry and counterpose it to the role of elites and elite discourse discussed in ‘much of the scholarship’ about nations and nationalism.

I find much that is attractive and valid in Fox’s and Miller-Idriss’s

approach, and their review of the literature in these subfields is insightful, sane and balanced. They are quite justified, as Hobsbawm recognized, in asking us to problematize and pay much greater attention to the role of non-elites than the grand narratives appeared to permit. For all that, their claims raise some fundamental issues about the definition of the field and the purposes of a study of nations and nationalism.

To begin with, one might question the assumption of an undifferentiated 'ordinary people' at the heart of the enterprise. Either 'the people' (folk) is a construct of nationalism itself, as in 'We, the people . . .'; or it is an unsociological category that needs to be broken down into its constituent parts, be they individuals, or various organized groups of people (e.g. movements, parties), or different interest and status groups (castes, classes, ethnic communities). From this perspective, we may speak of various non-elites, not simply 'ordinary people'. But the studies cited by our authors give for the most part little clue about the non-elite segment of 'the people' that is being studied, and how it relates to wider issues of nationhood and nationalism.

Of course, in a sense this hardly matters, if one's purpose is simply to describe and analyse the national actions and sentiments of non-elites. On the other hand, it becomes vitally important, the moment one wishes to engage in a causal analysis of the bases of nations and nationalism. But, interestingly, while Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss ask both 'what is the nation?' and 'when is the nation?' (talked about, performed, etc.), they do not touch on the main question behind much of the previous scholarship in the field, namely, 'why is the nation?', let alone 'who is the nation?'. This gives to their presentation a curiously four-square and static aspect. On the one hand, there are elites propounding their nationalist messages; on the other hand, there is the people who receive or ignore the message, and for whom, it appears, for most of the time nationhood is implicit, but of little overt concern. There is no sense of any interaction between elites and 'the people', or among groups of non-elites, and between them and the elites, which would give us a much more complex, nuanced and dynamic picture.

It is a picture to which only a sociohistorical approach could hope to do justice, and history is what is conspicuously missing in Fox's and Miller-Idriss's prospectus. Theirs is a here-and-now conceptual apparatus and programme of research, which takes no account of the heritage of communities or the traditions of successive generations, each building on (or destroying) the groundwork laid by others before them. While they concede that 'everyday nationhood' should not be studied independently of state construction, industrialism and elite manipulation, they claim that nations 'are not just the product of structural forces; they are simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaging in mundane activities in their everyday lives'.

True enough, but ordinary people and their activities are situated in an

historic context, and one that is central to the very idea of a nation progressing, as Benedict Anderson memorably reminded us, through linear, 'empty homogenous' time (Anderson, 1991[1983]).

Under the rubrics of the authors' research programme, there is little room for temporal questions, for the widespread sense of the nation existing, if not in 'nature', then in 'immemorial time'. Indeed, it would be interesting to discover how far the perceptions of time on the part of different groups matched those of the elites. More important, raising the 'why' and 'who' questions would inject a sense of process and movement over time into a research programme that could so easily turn into yet another example of the ahistorical 'blocking presentism' that characterizes so much recent writing in the field. (See Anderson, 1991[1893]; Peel, 1989)

This lack of historical imagination is reinforced by the tacit ethnocentrism and state-centrism of Fox's and Miller-Idriss's programme. As regards the first of these, questions of choosing and consuming the nation make sense in the industrialized West, where relatively liberal regimes allow a range of national (and other) choices and ethnic preferences, though even here, there are limits. As Michael Billig remarked:

One can eat Chinese tomorrow and Turkish the day after; one can even dress in Chinese and Turkish styles. But *being* Chinese or Turkish are not commercially available options. (Billig, 1995: 139, emphasis in original)

This constraint is even more marked in the many parts of the developing world where 'hot' nationalisms predominate and where, even for those who may be indifferent to the nationalist messages of their leaders, the 'wrong' choice could prove fatal, and where there is little room to display individual tastes and ethnic preferences. Even 'talking the nation', except in prescribed ways, could prove dangerous in Burma, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Zimbabwe. If this is correct, then 'everyday life' as a domain of the study of nationalism in its own right is necessarily confined, conceptually as well as practically, to the democratic West (including post-communist Europe). Not only can it not serve as a universal subfield; it has actually little or nothing to say about the most intractable current problems of nation building and nationalism in large areas of the world. This is a serious limitation, and once again we see that at its heart lies the attempt to separate 'everyday nationhood' from 'historic nationhood', and to sever the actions and responses of non-elites from those of elites in the common historic processes and problems of nationhood and nationalism.

To this involuntary ethnocentrism is allied the state-centred basis of the authors' research programme. This is partly a matter of the methodological nationalism that inheres in most questionnaires and quantitative surveys, as well as in the extrapolations from the ethnographic investigations that they recommend. But it also stems from the tacit equation of the everyday nation with the nation state, the failure to separate 'state' from 'nation', and

the questionable decision to assimilate ethnic difference and community to the nation and national identity. What then is talked about, chosen, symbolized and consumed is the nation *qua* national state – a conclusion reinforced by the brief opening definition of nationalism drawn from Ernest Gellner: ‘the project to make the political unit, the state (or polity), congruent with the cultural unit, the nation’ (1983: 1). But this state-centrism creates a double limitation in Fox and Miller-Idriss’s research programme. The first is their failure to specify the relevant frame of reference in the case of those nations without states such as Catalonia, Scotland and Kurdistan, where there may be a conflict of loyalties or concentric circles of allegiance. Is it Spain or Catalonia, Britain or Scotland, which is the relevant cultural unit? And what is the relevant frame of reference of the various immigrant communities in western states? Here, the failure to separate ethnic community from nationhood conceals as much as it reveals – in particular, the very different perceptions, decisions and consumption of nationhood that members of ethnic minorities may hold and display.

But the second and more serious limitation is the authors’ failure to step outside the ring of an existing national state and consider the interactions of elites and non-elites in the *formation* of nations and the origins and development of nationalist movements. In other words, the research programme developed by Fox and Miller-Idriss assumes the framework and boundaries of an already functioning national state in which ‘ordinary people’, for the most part citizens of the national state, talk, choose, enact and consume the (their?) nation. It has little or nothing to tell us about the sentiments and activities of non-elites either in earlier ethnic communities or during the formation of nations, or as part of a nationalist movement aiming to create a nation out of pre-existing ethnic groupings. Moreover, partly because of the nature of the methodologies proposed, it is only *modern* national states that can furnish the necessary arena for the study of everyday nationhood, and so ‘everyday nationhood’ is revealed as another species of modernism. Once again, we are locked into the present epoch in the name of ordinary people.

Ahistoricism; ethnocentrism; nation-statism; the failure to specify ‘the people’: these are serious limitations and problems for the study of ‘everyday nationhood’ propounded by Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, and they stem, I think, from an underlying rejection of the causal-historical methodology common to previous scholarship in the field. Much of the understanding and insight gained by these scholarly efforts came precisely from their readiness to embrace the task of providing an overall account of nations and nationalism. By concentrating on the ‘what’ and ‘when’ of the nation as talked, chosen, performed and consumed by ordinary people, and neglecting the ‘why’ and ‘who’, the study of everyday nationhood becomes restricted to the micro-analytical and descriptive rather than the causal and sociohistorical. Its insights are therefore confined to a narrow frame that

excludes the larger issues of enquiry into the origins and development of nations which exercised earlier historical sociologies of nationalism.

I do not wish to be understood as implying that the study of everyday nationhood has no place among the approaches to our understanding of nations and nationalism. On the contrary, such studies are vital, but only if they are part of wider approaches. But, though Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss are critically respectful of previous scholarship, they clearly oppose it to the study of everyday nationhood. Their assumption is that previous accounts were more or less exclusively elite-centred (though they cite the exception of Eric Hobsbawm).

However, such an assumption is in part misleading. Admittedly, someone such as Elie Kedourie (1971), with his concern for ideas, concentrated on the intellectuals, the 'marginal men'. But Karl Deutsch's analysis of the growth of nations focused exclusively on mass sociodemographic variables such as urbanization, literacy, communications and voting. Ernest Gellner's first theory of nationalism (1964: Chapter 7) highlighted the role of the recently urbanized 'proletariat' as one of the two prongs of nationalism (the other being the intelligentsia). Tom Nairn (1977) spoke of 'mass sentiments' and of the nationalists 'inviting the masses into history' in countering the depredations of capitalist imperialism in the colonies. In John Breuilly's (1993[1982]) historical account, the function of nationalism is to mobilize, coordinate and legitimate the needs and interests of various groups in society; while for Walker Connor (1994), the sense of belonging of the mass of the population is the sole criterion of national existence.

Clearly, there has been no lack of concern for the ideals and sentiments of non-elites, even if that concern has been less than systematic; and the same can be said of ethno-symbolist and perennialist scholars such as John Armstrong, John Hutchinson, Steven Grosby, Adrian Hastings and myself. But, the central point is that in all these accounts, the emphasis falls not on the thoughts and actions of the mass of a designated population (the non-elites), but on the relations and interplay between them and the elites within a wider national, or international, framework. Unlike the study of everyday nationhood, this kind of analysis can never be an end in itself, only an essential part of a wider account of why nations and nationalism emerge and why they have become such central features of the modern world.

There is a further point. What counts in the study of this relationship are the links that bind different strata to each other and to their leaders. For several scholars, these links are to be found in the various symbols, memories, values, myths and traditions that resonate among different segments of the designated population. Contrary to Hobsbawm's argument that there can be no connection between premodern religious, linguistic and regional communities and the modern quest for a territorial nation state (1990: 47), one can demonstrate that some of these communities – along with their traditions, myths and symbols – formed the bases upon which

later generations actually sought to create a territorial national state. It is easy, but quite misleading, to see this relationship simply in terms of elite appropriation, manipulation and justification. On the contrary: in many cases, the prior existence of linguistic, ethnic and religious communities formed the basis of subsequent nationhood, and endowed it with its 'everyday' qualities.

For example, the national states of western Europe were formed over the centuries around 'ethnic cores' (the English, northern French, Castilians) with their particular cultures and symbolisms; without these, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for a modern state, however strong and efficient, to have forged the nation. (We can see the problems of forging nations and *national* states in the ethnically deeply divided (ex-colonial) states of sub Saharan Africa and elsewhere). On the other hand, without the actions and institutions of the strong, centralized state, we might still have had only the 'untutored' and largely unselfconscious ethnicity of premodern life (Fishman, 1980). Hence, the importance of the continuing interplay between the ethnic traditions, myths, symbols and memories of various strata of the population and the political institutions and programmes of the elites. Only through analysis of this relationship and of the 'resonance' of these myths, symbols and traditions among non-elites as well as elites, can we begin to account for the formation of nations and their subsequent persistence and changes (Marx, 2003).

Now, perhaps the most obvious cultural link in this relationship is the one that Fox and Miller-Idriss highlight: the importance of mass ritual performance. In this connection we tend to think of great state occasions – inaugurations, coronations, marriages, jubilees, funerals – for which non-elites provide audiences and spectators rather than active participants. But there are also independence holidays that call for solemn rejoicing on the part of non-elites in processions, parades, flag waving and choral singing. We also have the mass Remembrance Day ceremonies in memory of those fallen in two world (and other) wars, in which an official performance by the political, military and religious elites is followed by an unofficial and more informal procession of war veterans, as occurs each November at the Cenotaph in London's Whitehall, and across Britain. It is interesting to recall that both this ceremony and the parallel one in Paris were initiated by a combination of elite and non-elite action. The original ceremony after the First World War was extempore and meant to be solely for a single occasion. But popular demand, and political fears at the time, quickly convinced the authorities to turn it into an annual institution and entrust its organization to the veterans' association (Mosse, 1990; Winter, 1995: Chapter 4).

The popular element is even more in evidence in the annual Australian ANZAC Day ceremony, both at the central Memorial in Canberra and at local monuments across the country. Here, much of the day, after the more

formal processions organized by veterans associations are completed, is given over to drinking and celebration of the comradeship ('mateship') of those who fell at Gallipoli in 1916. We can find an interesting parallel, albeit with greater formality, in modern Switzerland. A similar combination of state organization and local popular action was responsible for the 600th anniversary celebrations in 1891 of the Everlasting Alliance of the Swiss Confederation and the original Oath of the Rutli of 1291. Here it was a case of local groups, notably in Berne, initiating the summer festival, but soon the federal state stepped in to organize it on a grander, nationwide scale (Kapferer, 1988; Zimmer 2003).

The same interplay between elite ideals and non-elite traditions and attachments characterizes issues of landscape and homeland. This was, of course, a key part of the nationalist crusades: human beings were to return from the city's corruption to the purity of Nature, and there find their 'roots' in the (as yet) unspoilt landscapes and unchanging peasant life. One can see this in the ways in which North American artists such as Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt sought out the vast 'wilderness' of the American interior; even when they admired modern progress and its achievements, they looked to untamed nature to find spiritual exaltation. A similar search for roots opened the eyes of Russian artists and composers to their vast steppes and the life of the peasants, even as modern industry was beginning to erode it. It was the traditions and attachments of the peasants to their landscapes that was taken up, albeit selectively, by the nationalist intellectuals as key elements in their programmes to secure a viable and recognized homeland and to mobilize the mass of its population to support the movement for political autonomy and independence. (Ely, 2002; Wilton and Barringer, 2002).

Of course, elite programmes did not always carry the non-elites with them, as John Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss rightly point out. The number of Irish who could fathom the complex symbolism of the conjoint martyrdom of Christ and Cuchulain, which Patrick Pearse propagated in 1916, must have been severely limited. On the other hand, the equally distant symbolism of the Finnish sage Vainamoinen and the hero Lemminkainen, the protagonists of the *Kalevala*, which Elias Lonnrot had edited in 1835 out of the Karelian ballads that he had collected, was widely disseminated and became increasingly popular in Finland, especially through the post-independence school system and the music of Sibelius. More generally, heroes and golden ages fed the pride of downtrodden as well as dominant ethnic communities, and cults of such figures as St Joan, Arminius or King Arthur could touch the lives of millions through public enactments and schooling. This too became part of everyday nationhood, even if such cults tended to originate with sub-elites. Moreover, where the cult could be assimilated to pre-existing religious traditions, as with St Joan to Roman Catholicism, or the martyr Hussein to Shi'ite Islam, the line between elite

and non-elite nationhood became well nigh invisible. Both have become assimilated into an 'historic nationhood', the sense of national identity constructed in and through ethno-history (Branch, 1985; Gildea, 1994; Keddie, 1981; Lyons, 1979).

We can perhaps see the influence of historic on everyday nationhood most clearly by considering the ideals of mission and 'chosenness', which play so vital a part in various religions, particularly in the monotheistic tradition. Religious dimensions hardly figure in Fox and Miller-Idriss's analysis and research programme, reflecting the wider failure to place nationalism within the long-term cultural and religious traditions out of which it emerged. We may never know how widely a sense of ethnic election was shared by the populace at large in pre-modern times, except in some well-documented cases such as the Armenians, Greeks, Irish and Jews, as well as among the Puritan Dutch, Swiss, Scots, American colonists and Afrikaners. But, given the proximity of the Church in both the eastern and western traditions to the villagers and peasants, and, for all its universalism, its strong practical and organizational emphasis on the vernacular and ethnicity, we should not be surprised if a sense of ethnic election and mission became widely disseminated among non-elites. A sense of mission was also an important motive in, and consequence of, state warfare, particularly on the borders of Christendom against the Muslims, as in Catalonia or Hungary; though how far mobilized peasants came to share the knights' or *ghazi* sense of religious or ethnoreligious mission we may never know. Certainly, accounts of battles fought and won (or better, lost) became the staple of later legend and lore, as well as of works of drama and fiction. Clearly, this is an area that merits further research. (See Akenson, 1992; Armstrong, 1982: Chapter 3)

From these brief examples, we can begin to sense the need for a larger framework, one that brings together the concerns of Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss and the scholars on whom they draw, and those of other scholars for whom 'historic nationhood' is a prime construct. While studies of the everyday national concerns of non-elites are important in indicating the degree of 'fit' between them and elite ideals and programmes, they need to be situated within a broader and more dynamic enterprise, one that locates concepts of the nation and nationalism within a longer time-span, thereby revealing their profound historicity and their capacity for development and change. In this context, we need to remember that nationalism, despite its unifying core doctrine, comes in different forms, and this variety not only adds to the subject's complexity, but also makes it necessary to place the study of the manifestations of everyday nationhood within both their specific historical and geo-cultural contexts and the broader development of an overall sense of nationhood and nationalism in history. How far such an ambition is likely to be realized, will largely depend on the willingness of scholars of different theoretical persuasions to pool their

resources and agree on a common strategy for resolving the many problems of understanding in the field of nations and nationalism.

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The 'here and now' of everyday nationhood

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Anthony Smith's brief but pointed reply to our debate article, 'Everyday nationhood', reminds us of what inspired us in the first place in our own scholarly pursuit of nationalism. This time, however, we find ourselves in the crosshairs of Professor Smith's critical focus. In the limited space provided